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Social Equity: Its Legacy, Its Promise Social Equity

Social equity is rooted in the idea that each person is equal and has inalienable rights. Because of America's unique blend of social, religious, economic, and political characteristics, we value this concept despite, or perhaps because of, the simultaneous tensions of a capitalist economy, which requires inequality, set within a democratic constitutional system, which assumes equality. The impossibility of simultaneously achieving inequality and equality produces episodic "corrections." This was the case in the tumultuous 1960s, a period when the usually tame notion of equity gave rise to heated debate and resulted in calls for social change. Now, tumult in the form of economic inequality, unemployment, and globalization is a harbinger of renewed interest. This article explains the roots of the concept, its contemporary understandings, and its relevance to emerging issues.

Entering the twenty-first century, the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the United States rivals that of developing countries, the middle class has eroded, and social and economic cleavages compound fractured cultural bonds. These are social equity issues, for the term refers to the distribution of fairness. Coined in the midst of race riots and inequalities of the mid-twentieth century, it reemerges now in the context of intersections of disadvantage.

This article traces the development of social equity as a construct, discusses its utility for contemporary issues, and explains how intersections of disadvantage impede the development of social capital. First, we clarify the meaning of equity by distinguishing it from equality. Then, the term "social equity" is explored in the context of its emergence and application. Next, we explain its philosophical basis, and finally, we apply the construct to contemporary issues and conclude with a normative discussion.

Equity Compared to Equality

To be clear, "equity" and "equality" are terms that are often used interchangeably, and to a large extent, they have similar meanings. The difference is one of

nance: while equality can be converted into a mathematical measure in which equal parts are identical in size or number, equity is a more flexible measure allowing for equivalency while not demanding exact sameness. For example, a child entering school who does not speak English is at a substantive disadvantage compared to her native English-speaking classmates. Though the entire class may receive equal instruction in language, the non-English-speaking student requires additional tutoring if her training is to be equitable with that of her classmates.

Another example can be found in the contrast between equal rights legislation and affirmative action initiatives. From a legal perspective, the Civil Rights Acts, dating back to the first passed in 1866 in the aftermath of the Civil War, have each been crafted to ensure equality of citizens before the law. The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was adopted in 1868 and specifically provides for equal protection under the law. The courts use it to judge whether a challenged law creates suspect categories whose members are subjects of discrimination. The criterion considers whether group members have been historically discriminated against, have a highly visible trait, or have little to no power to protect themselves in the political process. Affirmative action, by contrast, was a lever to advance equity, such that, all else being equal, members of an underrepresented group would have priority in the hiring process as recompense for prior exclusion. It was not introduced until after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and met with lasting resistance.

Initiatives that advance simple equalities have proved less controversial than those designed to advance equity. While the former creates parallel lines on a ledger sheet, the latter perturbs power relations. For this reason, affirmative action received pushback from those advantaged by the status quo, and it has largely fallen out of favor. Simple equality is more readily accepted than actions designed to compensate for complex causes of inequality. It is for this reason that

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initiatives designed to ensure social equity require constant attention and advocacy. To explore the notion in more detail, we explain its development.

The Term “Social Equity”

Social equity is not an explicit constitutional value, but rather a term that implies a calculation of fairness, right, and justice (Nalbandian 1989). To explain its usage, we trace the subject from the beginnings of the discipline, to its contemporary form as *social equity* in the aftermath of the 1968 Minnowbrook Conference, to its current interpretation.

The notion of equity per se accompanied discussions of American government from its founding. Usual in writings was the prescription that government processes be guided by justice, equity, and fairness (Link 1971, 172–99). The enhanced term “social equity” emerged in the later twentieth century as urgency developed for government to be an instrument of change to correct the power imbalance between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

Historically, social equity theory was nested in the social contract. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) asserted, for example, that the greatest good of all reduces to liberty and equality, neither of which can exist without the other. And John Locke (1689) argued that the purpose of government is, in large part, to secure natural rights. Thomas Hobbes (1660) claimed that inequality does not exist in the state of nature, but instead arises from civil laws, and that peoples’ recognition of equality by nature is essential for a peaceful, just society. More recently, it has been rooted in the philosophy of John Rawls, the discussions at the Minnowbrook Conference, the ideals of New Public Administration, and the norms of New Public Service (Denhardt and Denhardt 2003; Hart 1974; Wooldridge and Gooden 2009). It has both empirical and normative dimensions: it involves determinations of how fairly administrative systems operate in the delivery of public services, as well as how meaningful our understanding of professionalism is (Brint 1994; Sullivan 2004). Its normative dimensions are apparent in public administration theory and are manifested in the work of the Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance within the National Academy of Public Administration, established in 1997 (Frederickson 2010).¹

A count of articles on the subject in *Public Administration Review* (*PAR*) reveals its forward focus. Using JSTOR’s search function to examine *PAR*’s past issues, we searched for articles that included the term “equity.” From the first issue in 1940 until 1969, the journal published 54 articles that mentioned equity in some form, either purposefully or in passing. The term was usually used as shorthand for the democratic concepts of fairness and equality, mentioned in such a way that the focus might as well have been on stick figures, evincing no distinction among groups, labels, categories, or conditions of advantage. The emphasis on “social” was not part of the term. However, 1969 was a watershed year: since then, there have been close to 800 articles dealing with the subject, either directly or indirectly. These works emphasize the human factor in governance, and the word “social” inserts group considerations into the otherwise liberal notion of individual equity.

Social equity draws attention to the human factor in terms of economic fairness and advantage. After the tumult of the 1960s, H. George Frederickson’s (1971) exhortations inserted social equity into the canon of public administration theory, research, and practice, joining it with efficiency and effectiveness as a foundational value. And with the performance movement notwithstanding, James Q. Wilson (1989) asserted that equity is more important than efficiency in the management of government agencies. That administrators should be committed to both good management and social equity is now well accepted, but that was not always the case. Because the 1968 Minnowbrook Conference became the watershed for popularizing the concept, the meeting becomes the dividing line by which we benchmark the term’s legitimation.

The Pre-Minnowbrook Focus

In the years leading up to the mid-1900s, equity was a subject referred to lightly, usually as part of a discussion of administrative procedures, especially in regard to fairness in public personnel systems, procedural hearings, or integrity in office. This passage is typical: “It is, therefore, the task of the central office to formulate personnel relations policies, establish disciplinary codes and standards insofar as possible, insist upon equity and fairness in all personnel actions, and provide unbiased counsel for all employees who desire it” (Johnson 1940, 60). Equity considerations were also discussed in terms of how to deal with immigrants (Mansfield 1941), in terms of the importance of lawyers in helping foster equity between parties (*Public Administration Review* 1946), and in terms of discussing bribery, in that “such a system puts a premium on attitudes and abilities which are not conducive to the highest standards of equity and efficiency” (Ebenstein 1945, 111).

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Equity as a concept evolved from a philosophical (social contract) to a structural (constitutional) to an administrative (social equity) concern. The last started to appear by the mid-1940s, when there began a slow but steady increase in the number of articles mentioning what we now call “social equity.” Paul Appleby’s observations about the work of public administrators provide an example. He wrote that any adequate conception of

equity has to have regard for the creative faculties of citizens—faculties that make life “not only an escape from brutality, but a movement toward the God” that persons can discover or create. He warned that public administration must be much concerned with this and that the reality of equity depends on it: “Let us not get so concerned with charts, work measurements, and classification problems that we cannot lift our eyes and see the place where we work, its real nature, its opportunity, and its responsibility” (1947, 95).

Other than Appleby’s work, equity was primarily discussed offhandedly until the 1960s (see, e.g., Bartlett 1955; Herson 1957; *Public Administration Review* 1948), or in brief reference to personnel issues (Corson 1961) or to the effect of federal subsidies for protection against floods and the promotion of navigation (Fox 1965, 66). More substantively, there were mentions such as this: “[W]e know there is a connection between housing distribution and the quality and equity of education, between school dropouts and delinquency,

between the location of a throughway and demography, land values, and public finance” (Mosher 1967, 325).

Social equity prior to Frank Marini’s 1971 anthology, which became the written record of the 1968 Minnowbrook Conference, developed as a framework for inquiry in response to cultural turbulence. The field had been slow to remove its scientific management blinders so that it could see this administrative imperative—an imperative that distinguishes the study of government from the study of business and one whose substance slowly expanded from structural and procedural concerns to issues of race and gender (Broadnax 2000; Oldfield, Cander, and Johnson 2006).

Debates arose about the pressure for and against change; the trade-off between equity and equality was becoming clear. To treat each neighborhood the same (equality) was not the same as treating each neighborhood equitably. For example, the allocation of police to neighborhoods produced a very different outcome when the same distribution was made to upper-middle-class streets versus the mean streets of the inner city. More officers were required in crime-ridden neighborhoods if peace was to be secured. In sum, fairness required substituting equity for equality (Miller 1969).

The Minnowbrook Era

By 1969, a steady stream of publications had begun. These include *Cities and Suburbs, the Case for Equity* (Pettingill, Chen, and Uppal 1970), which was one of the first books that linked the distribution of financial aid to inequity in cities. Economic and societal changes had altered social institutions and caused social upheaval. The poor and minorities, often overlapping, encountered inequities in housing, education, and job opportunities at the same time that aspirations rose (Gross 1971). Symposia such as “Changing Styles of Planning in Post-Industrial America” argued that equity must be a central concern in planning (Dyckman 1971, 332). Appreciation for this resulted in the awareness that both social equity and government productivity are concerned with the outcomes of public action. At the front end, social equity and productivity look at inputs (such that equity examines inputs in terms of the sources from which they were derived, such as income classes, socioeconomic groups, or geographic groups, while productivity measures look at the dollar value of inputs). The distinction is that questions of social equity target the distribution of services and their impact; productivity measures, on the other hand, focus on the quantity or quality of output. To wit, Dyckman (1971) warned that the distribution pattern of public services must be viewed as a basic criterion for public decision making, such that measures of social equity must accompany measures of productivity in order to assess the adequacy of public services.

The tide of social equity rose, and in 1974, *PAR* published a symposium on the subject. Among the articles is Chitwood’s (1974), whose argument is emblematic of the times. He argued that government activities focusing on productivity (e.g., the Hoover Commission; planning, programming, budgeting systems; program evaluation) had overlooked the importance of social equity and the administrative obligation to practice distributive equity. He characterized this as the importance of (1) providing services such as

education and police and fire protection to those who are unable to obtain them through market mechanisms in the quantity or quality that is essential; (2) providing services, such as compensatory education and job training, so that everyone has an equal opportunity to compete for and occupy all positions in society, including the most attractive ones; (3) providing services that ensure that people will receive the benefits to which they are entitled under law, such as public defender services and outreach activities that notify them of their rights to program benefits; and (4) providing services, such as food stamps and housing, so that everyone can meet minimum survival needs (Chitwood 1974, 32).

To achieve these ends, Chitwood (1974, 31) argued that the distributive function should occur in one of three patterns: equal services; proportional services, meaning services delivered in amounts that reflect an increasing function of a specified characteristic; or unequal services that correspond to relevant differences. In other words, the quantity of service provided should vary directly with the specified characteristic possessed by the client (32). For example, the number of uniformed police officers assigned to patrol a precinct should vary in proportion to the crime rate of that precinct.

Models such as Chitwood’s emerged at a time of high concern for fairness in the workplace, equal employment opportunities, affirmative action, and comparable worth (Frederickson and Smith 2003). In this vein, it had traditionally been the courts that had been the change agents, rather than administrators. For example, it was the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that changed the way school districts functioned. In fact, administrators had more often been party to the overdefinition of excellence, the unnecessary upgrading of occupational entry standards, the use of merit principles to protect incumbent officeholders from the “unqualified,” and the general preoccupation with credentialing the public service (McGregor 1974).

Like a snowball rushing downhill, the social impact of public action increasingly garnered attention. Studies were commissioned to evaluate program formulation, results, efficiency, and equity or marginality. Social indicators were used to highlight service gaps. The New York City Human Resources Administration even developed a “total equity” measure of the distribution of local poverty funds. Called the “Fair Share Allocation” standard, it plotted the disbursement of service money against the depth of poverty for the city’s neighborhoods (Bunge 1973, 554).

As attention refocused from an industrial-era society to the exigencies of a service economy, the need for participative decision making and collaboration between agencies and the recipients of services became more important. There were calls for service delivery models conducive “to doing *with* the client rather than doing *to* the client” (White and Gates 1974, 47; emphasis added). Along with calls for collaborative decision-making and -allocation processes came recommendations for incorporating social equity into the decision calculus. Calling it “equity analysis,” Lucy and Birkhead (1977) suggested that incorporating such an analysis into decisions would help identify inequities within as well as between local government jurisdictions.

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Similarly, equal employment opportunity gained momentum. First implemented for hiring by the federal government, a series of executive orders beginning in 1965 required nondiscrimination on the part of agencies.² Proponents of equal employment opportunity argued that merit and equity are compatible. By insisting that any selection method measure the ability of a person to perform a specific job, appointing authorities would remain faithful to the intent of civil service laws and to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This evened the race at the starting gate because other characteristics, such as race or gender, could not be used to filter candidates into or out of the applicant pool.

This raises a question that political scientists contend is one of the central questions in policy studies, namely, “who gets what?” Social equity as an administrative concern added the normative question, “who ought to get what?” (Campbell 1976). For example, as the understanding of social equity evolved, the concepts of segmented equality compared to overall equality developed as well, as did the notion of active versus passive representation. Lois Recascino Wise (1990) assessed social equity within the civil service and raised two issues: first was the relatively high level of passive representation in government for members of economically disadvantaged groups contrasted with their rather low numbers in decision-making positions; second was the realization that the labor market is clearly segmented, with the tasks of government more likely to be executed by members of disadvantaged groups and the decisions of government more likely to be made by elites.

In sum, scholarship following the Minnowbrook Conference reflected the turbulent practice environment. Social tumult coupled with dashed expectations of advantage placed a burden on government, requiring it to be the equalizer. Public administration scholarship addressed cultural and societal needs as a whole, while administrators struggled to institutionalize procedures that would ensure social equity. As the years have passed, these efforts have reappeared wrapped in concerns about marriage rights, environmental justice, intergenerational economics, and other intersections of disadvantage. It is to these that we will turn after we discuss the philosophical grounding that justifies social equity as the legitimate province of a democratic government.

Modern Political Philosophy and Social Equity

The evolution of social equity reveals the route to distributive justice. The roots of social equity stem from specific philosophical traditions (especially social contract theory) that sought to address and counter centuries-old inequities and to establish an understanding of governments and rights based on the (then-radical) conception of natural rights. Works by Rousseau, Locke, Hobbes, and Immanuel Kant provided the early fuel for arguments establishing that a government’s protections of certain inalienable liberties and equalities were necessary for that government’s legitimacy. To take a more recent example, Hannah Arendt asserted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that concepts of natural rights are meaningless in the absence of a government that is willing and able to protect them. Simply put, while useful, natural rights do not exist in a vacuum, but rather take on their full meaning with respect to the *protection of those rights*.

That these traditions led to reconceived notions of the purposes and tasks of governments is common knowledge in public

administration. However, the *modern* discussion of social equity largely began with philosophers reflecting on why societies that had been influenced by social contract theory still had great inequities. Seemingly, some peoples were not present in the great debates over what Aristotle termed “the good life held in common.” These modern works, like their progenitors, are grand commentaries on society, works that seek to examine the social construction of modern inequity. It is helpful here to review four of the most important works, which have often provided the philosophical underpinnings of equity.

Without question, the most important modern work is John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Virtually every scholar writing about modern social equity has referenced and is indebted to this book. In the social contract tradition, its concept of the original position (i.e., that principles of justice should be decided from behind a veil of ignorance) fostered the idea that a lack of self-interest would lead people to choose positions and practices that are fair for everybody. The two principles of Rawlsian justice are simple. In the first, “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (1971, 60). These include rights to property, speech and assembly, and freedom from arbitrary arrest, rights long established in the social contract tradition. The second principle has two elements: (1) the difference principle, which holds that social and economic inequalities should be arranged to benefit the least advantaged, and (2) fair equality of opportunity, which holds that offices and positions must be open to everybody. Equality of opportunity relies on the assumption that the term “everybody,” or, to use the American phrase, “of the People,” is meant to be inclusive. What one can also see, especially in the second principle, is that simply respecting a generic idea of equity is not enough—the travails involved in civil rights or the enfranchisement of minorities established that true freedoms and equality cannot be established until *all* interested parties, especially those without a voice in the present system, can negotiate the social contract.

A second approach (also often employed by those writing in social equity) is offered by Michael Walzer in *Spheres of Justice* (1983). According to this conceptualization, we all compete for goods (membership in community, money, commodities), the meaning of which is determined by societies, which, in turn, determine distributions, so each good is accompanied by an autonomous sphere of justice. This makes distributive justice the art of differentiation, distinguishing between monopoly (concentration) and dominance (transposing demands in one sphere to others), while freedom is the absence of dominance. Simple equality, Walzer asserts, is difficult to achieve, likely unattainable, and has led to tyranny. Given this reality, he believes that not all distributions can be equal, but because there are separate, multiple spheres, everyone should be able to achieve equality in at least some. Walzer believes that this is, in practice, superior to Rawls’s view of distributive justice because there is no single set of primary or basic goods conceivable across all moral and material worlds (1983, 8).

A third approach is that enumerated by Ronald Dworkin in *A Matter of Principle* (1985). This approach distinguishes between policy based arguments (attempts to convince decision makers that they would be better off to follow a certain policy) and arguments of principle (arguments for greater rights because of considerations of

fairness and results that would make them better or worse off). He argues that it is better to judge based on principles than on policy. Thus, in the end, law depends on political morality adjudicating between two good fits (in which the whole process of legal interpretation is based upon analyzing a case, then ordering principles into a legal theory that is both coherent and acknowledges past mistakes). Fundamentally, his argument is that legal interpretation is an act of political and moral philosophy.

A fourth approach involves equity standards. James Regens and Robert Rycroft (1986) described two standards: procedural equity and substantive equity. Procedural (access and treatment) pertains to the fairness of a decision-allocation process, while substantive (to raise questions about the distribution of tangible and symbolic goods) focuses on policy effects in terms of cost and benefit distribution (1986, 423–24). The authors recommend that bureaucratic performance include systematic assessments of both procedural and substantive equity, as well as of the relationships between the two concepts. Their point is that efficiency dominates the study of administrative systems, forcing equity criteria to be defended, at least in part, on efficiency grounds (424). They also argued that the emphasis on efficiency has constrained the incorporation of equity standards into policy evaluation frameworks. Further, even when equity issues have been raised, the use of efficiency criteria has contributed to a shift in emphasis from procedural to substantive policy concerns (428).

As seen in the foregoing discussion, there is no lack of gross and idiosyncratic interpretations of the meaning of social equity and how to realize it. One may wonder what the field can learn from philosophical discussions of equity, especially when many are contradictory. Do we favor procedural equity? Or outcome equity? Or both? That is a discussion for all participants in the social contract, for it is in philosophy that values discussed in the abstract reach their highest potential. However, it is in administration that the realization of these values becomes possible.

Administration cannot exist without some philosophical force guiding it, and the realization of equity is not possible without a clear understanding of what it is. So, too, philosophy on equity is meaningless without the will and power to execute it. As Frederickson (2010) reminded us, public administration is the vehicle for implementing the values of individuals, groups, and communities. These values are enduring, but they also compete with each other. At any point in time, one set of values may have to be minimized in order to maximize other, equally important, values. He also reminded us that administrators are not value neutral, and neither are administrative theories. However, without operating from some paradigm of equity (philosophy), the realization of equity (administration) is not possible.

It is precisely this gulf between theory and praxis that makes understanding the linkages between the two all the more important. The compound theory of equity, as put forward by Frederickson (2010), provides several principles that clarify these linkages. First, there are simple individual equalities, meaning one person, one vote, or Kant's categorical imperative. Second is segmented equality, in

which there is equality within segments but not equality between segments. Third, there are block equalities, in which there is equality between groups and subclasses. Fourth, there are domains of equality in which goods, services, or benefits are distributed. Fifth, there are equalities of opportunity, such that there is an equal opportunity for a job if both have the same probability of getting a job and the same means (talent). Finally, there is the value of equality in which only the individual can judge which or what pleases him or her. A rule-based distribution of shares is based on non-neutral judgments about each person's needs (e.g., more police protection for a person who is threatened in order to make that person equal with someone who is not threatened). This conceptualization makes it clear that there is not a universal scope of equality. Instead, there are "equalities." What Frederickson made clear is that the realization of social equity lies in the balance between philosophy and praxis. Philosophy has highlighted the importance of social equity, and making social equity the third pillar of administration has legitimated it.

The Social Equity Lens

Central to the field, social equity is several things: it is a habit of mind for the decision maker, and it is an administrative goal that can be measured. It is also a lens through which needs are identified and processes are grounded. Before it dangles the promise of a fair and just society. This section provides examples of complex social problems as they appear through the social equity lens. The promise, of course, is that resolution would yield fairness and justice.

In the mid-1900s in the United States, the social equity lens was primarily focused on the plight of African Americans as de jure and de facto segregation practices were outlawed and jurisdictions grappled with how to right wrongs and how to achieve racial parity (Dittmer 1995). Gender inequality was targeted next. Half a century later, the focus has evolved to a concern less about racial or gender inequities and more about the intersections of disadvantage that occur with the conflation of gender, race, class, sexuality, and environment (Aronowitz 1981; Bearfield 2009; Oldfield, Cander, and Johnson 2006). Suffice it to say that the problems of demographic "otherness" are enduring, intertwined, and require continuous attention.

Socioeconomic class. The American dream holds that those who study hard, work hard, and invest well will pull themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve all that is good in a consumer culture. However, John DiIulio (2004, 668) reported a study indicating that the dream is more myth than reality. It tracked 6,000 individuals born between 1942 and 1972. Almost half—42 percent—who were born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution ended up

where they started—at the bottom. Only 7 percent of those born into the bottom fifth rose to the top tier—the rags-to-riches success story of American myth. And yet upward mobility is the measure of success, and policies are designed as if, should aspirants pursue the American dream, they will succeed. There are complex reasons why upward mobility is rare, ranging from global economic restructuring to poor job opportunities to inadequate transportation, education, or training, among a host of additional constraints. The social equity

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lens provides a means of identifying stumbling blocks and establishing meaningful goals. Real opportunity provides a desired end state that can be benchmarked.

Sexuality. Sexuality issues also benefit from the social equity lens. In terms of transgender issues, a 2012 ruling of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) declared that transgender people are protected from workplace bias under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Explaining that intentional discrimination against a transgender individual—because that person is transgender—is, by definition, based on sex, the EEOC ruled that such discrimination violates the law. This ruling was the culmination of several prior court decisions. In 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* that Title VII bars gender discrimination. That ruling held that employers cannot engage in sex stereotyping and cannot insist that employees match the stereotype associated with their group. In 2004, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit applied the ruling and found in favor of a transitioning employee who had been criticized for not being “masculine enough” (Rabiner 2012). Incremental steps, such as the transgender ruling, continue to advance social equity, although the steps are laborious and take years to resolve.

Safe schools. A contemporary example of the intersection of race, class, and neighborhood is demonstrated by school closings in the city of Chicago (Rossi 2012). When the Chicago School Board voted to close seven schools labeled chronic failures, the affected neighborhoods erupted. The school board justified its decision by claiming that the schools had not been serving students well for years. Present at the announcement was the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who declared that the closings had a disproportionate impact on African American communities and reflected an “apartheid” educational system. He was joined by critics who complained that targeted schools had been starved of resources, lacked up-to-date books, had no libraries, had lost math and reading specialists, and had suffered inequitable resources that contributed to their demise. Said Jackson, “There are 160 CPS schools without libraries; 140 of them are south of North Avenue. That’s apartheid” (Rossi 2012, para. 7).

The lack of equity in one aspect of social life, such as public schools, has consequences for inequity in other aspects of life. For example, in the case of school closings, neighborhoods are abandoned. Blight overtakes the closed building, and surrounding shops lose their customer base and close. Problems of vagrancy ensue, housing values plummet, and an urban wasteland results. Another example in the context of safe schools is the problem of bullying, with children lower in status being abused by those who have more power (Short 2010). Problems of lack of respect, disregard for the situation of others, and obstacles to full-fledged participation in the life of the community are informed by the social equity lens. Glaser et al. (2011–12) proffered an optimistic finding, however. They studied public perceptions of social equity and concluded that when citizens understand the root cause of disadvantage, they are willing to pay more taxes if doing so will address core social inequities. In other words, social equity resonates with American values in a way that terms such as “social welfare” do not.

Public transportation. In the case of public transportation, rapid transit transports people from one neighborhood to another for work, for school, for play, and for arts. The lack of public transportation

ensures that the disadvantaged have little access to distant suburbs, thus circumscribing their opportunities for jobs and exposure to other communities. Again, through the social equity lens, it is clear that the public provision of highways for vehicles but not the provision of light rail and buses advantages one set of citizens over another.

Health care. It is in health care debates that one can see what happens when there is deep disagreement about which citizens merit access to care. Does access belong to those who can pay, or does it belong to everyone? Forty years ago, Mott (1971) warned that the adequacy of health programs for the medically indigent and underinsured were increasingly in question. Piecemeal services, long waits, outrageous costs, and incomprehensible regulations were frequent complaints. By now, problems of access to care have multiplied, and the political culture is tied in knots, unwilling to treat health care as a public good but equally unwilling to treat it as purely a for-profit service for those who can afford it. Again, the social equity lens allows policy makers to debate the issues in terms of how access can be ensured in a fair and just manner.

Environmental threats. There are a variety of environmental issues that benefit from the social equity lens. For instance, Bell (2011) argued that climate change violates human rights, specifically those related to life, physical security, health, and subsistence. Framing the solution as one of social equity, he argued that there must be protection for current and future persons’ basic rights from the effects of human-caused climate change. More immediately, future generations inherit the fiscal and environmental problems created by the current generation. According to Kotlikoff (1992), what is really needed is generational accounting, which connects present accounting with future problems. Ever larger problems of overpopulation, resource overuse, and climate change are already present (DeLattre 1972; Kennedy 1993). The urgency of these messages is resonant of the calls for attention to racial inequities in the mid-1950s.

Tomorrow’s social equity issues present a challenge unlike those of the past decades because of their interconnected, global nature. Climate change, for example, is a concern that overrides political boundaries and demonstrates the intersection with intergenerational justice. Social equity issues focus on a carbon space for future generations and an environment that does not cause the poor to bear the brunt of the problems. Cap and trade schemes, carbon emissions taxes, and personal ecological space quotas are all means of climate change mitigation, yet they may not lead to intergenerational justice and they may not even ensure a clean environment for future generations (Adve and Engineer 2010; Schuppert 2011).

Intergenerational. If social equity is a guiding principle in public decision making, then program planning, budgetary allocations, and staffing plans are the vehicles by which the road is traveled. For example, when intergenerational equity is a priority, pay-as-you-go plans predominate. When the next generation is ignored, bonds are let such that the next generation will inherit the debt. The social equity lens provides a means for identifying and articulating intergenerational issues in such a way that questions of fairness can be posed and addressed.

Human trafficking. Just as environmental issues cross national borders, so do the problems of human trafficking. This is a social equity

concern in the global context that involves the treatment of primarily women and children, although it can extend to men as well. With the language of social equity to frame discussions, there is an ability to articulate the issues and to exert pressure. This is advantageous for discussions of trafficking, as well as for efforts that call on the most vulnerable of populations to assert themselves. One such example is the intersection of gender and class. In India, for example, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a trade union organized by poor Indian women working in self-employed jobs. These women work in India's "unorganized sector," and much of their work is not recognized. SEWA representatives note that society places many constraints on them, so this group was initially founded to collectivize the risk of working and to share in the benefits. This group demonstrates not only the dangerous intersectionalities between gender and class, but also the fact that, very often, achieving social equity requires oppressed groups themselves to band together for their common benefit and then to demand attention. The fact that women and minorities are also at distinct disadvantages in terms of food and water security reflects this growing global issue of social equity (Karl 2009).

Social equity concerns are complicated because of political and economic realities and because of the number of variables that the lens can embrace. Race, gender, and class are the stalwarts, but the focus has expanded beyond that to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender family issues, child custody, environmental, organizational, economic, and social justice, as well as intergenerational issues and others yet to be identified (Katznelson 2005). It is convenient that social equity goals lend themselves to quantification because it legitimates them in administrative processes. When equity outcomes are measured with the same gravitas as other operations, such as the number of cases processed or the number of students graduated or the number of home loans issued, this positions equity as an essential component of public performance. Reasonable indicators are procedural fairness, access, quality, and equitable outcomes. Procedural fairness involves due process, equal protection, and equal rights. Access refers to distributional equity. Quality refers to the level of consistency across services delivered to all constituents. Outcomes focus on the degree to which programs and policies produce an equitable impact for all those served.

In sum, the construct of social equity provides a robust framework for tackling domestic, international, and global issues. There are vast connections and interconnections among *all* equity issues. Where the quality of peoples' lives are affected, ethical decision-making models that incorporate a global perspective with an emphasis on human rights theory are called for (Alvez and Timney 2008). We have begun to have a fuller appreciation of what social equity means in a globalized environment. This has led us from the travails of particular groups to attention to global human rights initiatives and the call for social equity for all peoples.

Challenges Ahead

Demographic distinctions and access to public programs are not the only focus for the social equity lens. As the middle class erodes

and political preferences become more polarized, the advantaged and the disadvantaged vote for opposite purposes (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008). For example, school reformers have imposed standardization that has resulted in schools failing to meet the learning needs of the poor and minorities but doing well for the college bound (Tyack and Cuban 1995). Hacker (2006) detailed erosions in pensions and cuts in health care benefits. Employers have moved from defined-contribution to defined-benefit retirement systems, reduced the subsidies they pay for employee health insurance, and discarded commitment to loyal employees. While the business and political culture perpetuates the "personal responsibility" myth, the burden if collectivizing the risks and supplying a safety net continues to fall on government. And this is where social equity graduates from a lens to an imperative.

When H. George Frederickson first coined the term, social equity had to do with the fairness of the organization, its management, and its delivery of public services. Now ensconced in the canon, the term's meaning has broadened to encompass the policy formulation and rulemaking aspect as well as outcomes. The durability of the construct equips it to tackle a host of conundrums. The framework draws attention to the global interconnectedness of institutions

and the relations and dependencies that they spawn in terms of global sustainability, civic engagement, and environmental justice (Wooldridge and Gooden 2009).

There is increasing interdependence among people around the world, drawing more attention to social equity in terms of human rights. Economic policy, environmental policy, and immigration policy have effects beyond national borders and beyond generations. International organizations, such as the United Nations, play a major role in keeping social equity concerns front and center. They set international standards and disseminate information on how nations rank in terms of

social equity criteria. The Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations Development Programme, for example, include a number of gender goals, such as promoting gender equality and empowering women (Goal 3), reducing child mortality (Goal 4), and improving maternal health (Goal 5). Under Goal 3, there are specific targets, such as the ratio of literate women to men 15–24 years old and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml> for an example). Goals such as these are emblematic of a prosocial equity agenda, a term that we will encounter more frequently as internationalization converts the world into a tightly interconnected community (Buss and Ahmed 2011).

The concept has cemented a normative platform for the field. Social equity has taken its place as a variable in the analytic constructs of researchers, as a concept in the philosophy of public administration, and as a guide for the ethical behavior of public servants. Social equity is also one of the normative touchstones for administrative integrity (Cooper 2004). Similar to how early arguments separated public administration from both business and political science and provided a *raison d'être* for a separate field of study, social

equity since the 1970s has kept the field grounded in the application of democratic principles and dreams. It reminds us that social contracts require the participation and voice of the many, not the privileged few. Despite the pessimism with which its lofty goals were first met and despite the backlashes, there have been enormous strides (Goodsell 1983; Herbert 1972; Riccucci 2009; Rice 2004; Schlesinger 1986; Willbern 1973).

Social equity is now a moral imperative of the field (Johnson and Svava 2011, 20–22; Svava and Brunet 2005), such that there are commitments that public administrators should follow: (1) procedural fairness, meaning due process, equal protection and equal rights; (2) equity in the availability of service and benefits; (3) equity in the process of providing services and benefits; (4) an equal level of outcomes for all groups; and (5) a guarantee of a place at the table to express views on policy choices and service delivery. Just as policy scholars look back to Lasswell's definition of politics as the study of who gets what, social equity causes scholars to ask “for whom is this program good?”

The promise of social equity is its capacity to frame deliberations, emphasize fairness, and monitor outcomes. The penalty for not attending to social equity issues domestically and internationally is that, in its absence, there is civil unrest and political instability. For example, reduced social capital contributes to unrest such as that witnessed in the events of the 2011 Arab Spring. Social equity moves the discussion from “ballot box democracy” to real democracy—where equality means having one *meaningful* vote. It is an activist notion that requires government to be a lever for change, and it joins efficiency and effectiveness as a third pillar and as the normative touchstone for the field.

Social equity concerns fall naturally within the purview of public administration, for government is the entity of last resort when the market and social dynamics create problems that do not resolve on their own. Policy debates about public education, access to health care, housing, food, water, and environmental justice all provide examples of the social equity frontier—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Notes

1. Any article that traces the insertion of social equity into the canon of public administration theory and research would be remiss not to mention Philip Rutledge. Like Sisyphus, he pushed the rock of social equity and was a primary advocate for the establishment of the Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance within the National Academy of Public Administration.
2. Signed in 1965, Executive Order 11246 established equal employment opportunity in federal employment. Amended in 1967, 1969, and many subsequent years, this approach has expanded job opportunities in federal government by providing protection against discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, parental status, disability, religion, age, color, and national origin.

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